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THE BATTLE OF FRAGA AND LARCHAMP IN ORDERIC VITAL

In the introduction to his edition of the *Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, O. Densusianu calls attention to the resemblance between Orderic Vital's account of the battle of Fraga (1134) and the epic tradition of Larchamp.¹ In his opinion Orderic would have adapted the Larchamp story to the facts of Fraga. On the other hand, in a note on Densusianu's statement, Professor Raymond Weeks would have Orderic modify the real battle by the incidents of the epic legend.² Either conclusion may well be correct, but before we consider the point as definitely settled a more detailed analysis of Orderic's description might be worth while.

This description, whether by accident or design, is not reproduced in its entirety by Densusianu. Indeed Orderic himself inserts into it a paragraph on the death of Robert of Normandy. But it must be read as a unit in order to be fully understood.

Alphonso of Aragon was besieging Fraga. Its inhabitants asked aid from Africa. It came, but before joining battle its commander sent word to Alphonso to raise the siege. Then, Orderic says, "*rex sanctas sibi de capella sua reliquias deferri praecepit*," and on these relics the king swore he would do so only in case the city surrendered, or he was killed, or put to flight. Twenty barons swore with him. He then summoned his friends and neighbors (Orderic is not particularly consistent in his account), fell back on a nearby hill, and withstood the repeated attacks of the Arabs during three days and three nights. Finally Robert of Tarragona, with other allies, appeared, charged the exhausted infidels, and drove them in headlong rout.

But in this transitory life no mortal fortune endures. The Moslems of Fraga and the Christian renegades harbored there, fearing Alphonso's vengeance and the valor of his brave soldiers, "marked with the cross of Christ" (*Christi cruce signatos*), offered

¹ Edition of the "*Société des anciens textes français*," pp. xlvī-xlviii.

² *Modern Philology*, II, 234, n. 1.

peace and submission. In his obstinacy the king rejected all proposals, and vowed he would take the city by storm. In their despair the citizens sent again to Africa and to some of the pagan rulers of Spain.

This time the African prince came with a large army, and the emirs of Cordova, Dalmaria, and the cities of the coast. In five divisions they advanced. Two hundred camels, laden with supplies, formed the first, in order to tempt an attack from the booty-loving Christians. The other four remained concealed, to catch the pursuing enemy unawares.

At Fraga two rivers come together, the Segre and the Ebro (in reality the Cinca). On the plain between them the battle was fought ("in Campo Dolenti inter haec flumina pugnatum est"). Learning of the enemy's approach, Alphonso urged his leaders to be valiant. When the division of camels appeared he ordered Bertran of Carrion to charge it. Bertran suggested caution and strategy. Alphonso intimated cowardice, at which Bertran rushed forward, the train turned in flight, the countless supports came up and slaughtered the pursuers by the thousands. Alphonso, however, taking his stand on a hill, proposed to fight till death ("ad mortem usque pro Christo configere proposuit"). But the bishop of Urgel objected that should he fall the whole region would be possessed by the Pagans, and ordered him to escape. Choosing the weakest point in the hostile line, the king opened a way through with sixty knights—sixty reduced to barely ten when he finally cut his way out. And among the slain lay the bishop.

The joy of the Pagans was great. It was also untimely, for Alphonso is met on his flight to Saragossa by reinforcements of Aragonese and French. Calling on God to grant him one last vengeance before his death, he leads these fresh troops by devious ways to the shore, surprises the Arabs in the act of loading their vessels with spoil and prisoners, and crushes them. One boat was freighted with the heads of Christians, proofs of victory for the king of Africa. Another carried seven hundred prisoners and much treasure.

The heads recovered were consigned to the church for burial. The seven hundred prisoners, hearing the noise of the conflict, threw

off their chains, leaped ashore, seized the weapons of the fallen, and aided in the carnage. Thus was the joy of the infidels changed into mourning ("et Christiana cohors in cunctis operibus suis Deum benedixit"). Shortly afterward Alphonso fell ill and died.¹

The legendary character of part of this description of the Fraga campaign is quite evident. So too is the religious bias of the author. Both excite pardonable suspicion of the accuracy of any section of the story. But before weighing romance against history on the basis of Orderic's narrative alone, it is advisable to compare his pages with the statements of another record of the same events, where there is not the least question of romancing.

The *Cronica de Alfonso VII* (-1147) dates but a few years after Orderic's *Historia*. It was written in Spain, not far from Fraga. It had the incidents of that great defeat fresh in mind. It, too, shows a strong partisan coloring, but it is a bias due to patriotism and not religion, and it works steadily against Alphonso, not for him. For all the king's mischance is attributed to his sins against the neighboring Christian kingdom of Leon.

In company with several bishops, among whom was Donao of Jaca, and numbering among his soldiers French knights and other allies, the *Cronica* tells us, Alphonso was besieging Fraga. The Arab ruler of Valencia and Murcia, Abengama by name, marched to its relief. In two battles he was driven from the field (*de campo*), leaving rich spoil for the victors.

With him, on this campaign, Alphonso carried a richly decorated shrine (*arca*), which contained a piece of the true cross. This shrine he had stolen from a monastery of Leon. He also had with him relics of the Virgin and various saints. All these sacred objects were kept in a tent, which the king used as a chapel, and which was pitched close by the royal tent. A large body of clergy watched over them. Now the people of Fraga, after Abengama had fled, offered to surrender. But Alphonso, as a punishment for his sins against Leon and Castille, answered that he intended to storm the town, kill its nobles, and make prisoners of their wives and children. And this answer he confirmed by a royal oath on his relics.

¹ *Historia ecclesiastica*, XIII, c. 8, 10 (edition of the "Société de l'Histoire de France," V, 16-23).

But Abengama had rallied another army, from Africa, Cordova, Seville, Granada, Valencia, and all Spain, knights, footmen, archers, "countless thousands." This fact, however, became known to Alphonso only at the hour when his sentinels espied the advancing host. He gave orders at once to defend the camp. But his forces had been weakened by the departure of many Aragonese nobles and other soldiers to collect supplies. The camp was surrounded, nor could the prayers of the clergy avail because of the king's sins. Unable to defend the camp the Christians drew out into the plain (*in campum*), whereupon an ambushed division of the Pagans stormed the camp, seized the shrines, and carried off many clergy and members of the royal household. But Danao, bishop of Jaca, remained on the field together with many nobles, French knights, and all the leading men of Aragon. Seven hundred foot soldiers, who formed the king's bodyguard, fell in one place. Finally Alphonso escaped to Saragossa with ten followers. He then took refuge in a monastery of his kingdom, and died in a few days of heart disease. The bishop of Lescar was carried to Valencia, put to the torture on account of his faith, and finally ransomed.¹

If we compare this account of the campaign around Fraga with Orderic's, we are quickly convinced that both writers are telling the same story. Their general statements agree and so do curious details, which would seem surely legendary were the version of the *Historia* our only guide. Among these details are the three separate fights—two Moslem defeats and a final victory in the *Cronica*, a defeat, a victory, and a defeat in Orderic—the relics and the oath sworn on them, mysterious in Orderic (who, however, retains enough of his original to say that the relics were fetched *de sua capella*), plain in the *Cronica*, the escape of Alphonso with ten comrades, and the death of a bishop in battle. Even the rhetorical *in Campo Dolenti*, twice used in the *Historia*, may echo the source of *de campo*, *in campum* of the monk of Leon. And when Orderic tells us that the number of Christian captives on one ship was seven hundred, is he not influenced by the report which made seven hundred soldiers of Alphonso's bodyguard die in one place, as given in the *Cronica*? Of the two records the *Historia* is the earlier—about 1141, at the latest,

¹ *España Sagrada*, XXI, 339-42.

to about 1147, as the earliest for the *Cronica*. Therefore a common source seems quite plainly indicated.

How Orderic got his knowledge of Fraga, from manuscript or by word of mouth, is not so easily determined. The intimate correspondences noted above would point toward a written source. This source he would have worked over under the influence of epic romance. Or if his information reached him orally, he would have worked over what he had heard also. For only under the assumption of a revision of his first draft can Orderic's insertion of the death of the Norman duke into the midst of the Fraga campaign be explained. The death occurred while the campaign was in progress. A revision then would be what we have in the actual text of the *Historia*, and it is this revision, and not the original story, which first received the epic flavoring. Orderic had conceived quite another idea of Alphonso and his purpose from the one held by the monk of Leon. To the author of the *Cronica*, the king of Aragon was the enterprising ruler of a rival kingdom, whose sword had been quite as dangerous to Christians as it might be to infidels. His army was an aggregation of hardy freebooters. To Orderic, however, remote from the jealousies and internecine feuds of Christian Spain, Alphonso was nothing less than a worthy soldier of the Cross. His followers, subjects or foreigners, were genuine Crusaders—*Christi cruce signatos*, in his own words. And this conception, firmly implanted in Orderic's mind and profiting by the memories of other combats between believers and unbelievers which it found there, was the leaven, we believe, which leavened the entire record of the *Historia*.

Two especial models of legendary wars between Christians and Pagans offered themselves to Orderic at the time of his final revision of the Fraga campaign. The one, which does not receive direct mention anywhere in his work, was the *Chanson de Roland*. The other, to which he refers at least twice elsewhere, was the story of Larchamp. Now Orderic's Fraga, we think, was constructed after the pattern of the *Roland*, though it incorporated into its narrative, beyond a doubt, important sections of Larchamp. For Orderic divides his account of the struggle around Fraga into three distinct battles: a Christian victory, a Christian defeat, a Christian revenge. This division, we recall, is the division made by *Roland*, and in the

same order. At Larchamp, if we follow the *Chanson de Guillaume*, three Christian defeats preceded the Christian triumph. In the *Cronica*, presumably accurate from the point of view of history, two Christian victories—tersely told—were more than counterbalanced by the final rout.¹

In harmonizing his division of the Fraga battles with the facts as he must have known them, Orderic shows unsuspected skill. The two defeats of the Moslems, in the *Cronica*, are fused into one long struggle of three days and three nights, in the *Historia*. Orderic's second battle and the annihilation of Alphonso's army, together with the escape of its leader, parallels, even in its accessories, the record of the *Cronica*. The cause of the defeat, Alphonso's oath on relics, his *demesure*, to borrow an epic term, is stressed in both narratives. In the pagan ambush which storms the Christian camp in the *Cronica* we see the original of the ambush which overwhelmed Alphonso's men, when they rushed to spoil the division of camels. And here also may be a beginning of epic, the *demesure* of the oath suggesting to Orderic the *demesure* of the taunt of cowardice flung by the king at Bertran's wise caution.

Perhaps in this second battle of Orderic there is a direct reminiscence of a detail of *Roland*. We do not mean the death of a bishop on the field. A bishop had perished in the *Cronica* also. Still this likeness to *Roland* may have occurred to Orderic, as it does to us, and opened the way for a direct citation. Alphonso, we remember, when ordered to escape by the bishop (an incident of the *Historia* which is not mentioned by the *Cronica*), charged at the head of sixty men, of whom only ten survived the onset. Ten fugitives from Fraga figure in the *Cronica*. That number, therefore, may be regarded as historical. But whence the idea of the sixty who made the attempt? May we not suppose that at this moment, aroused by the striking resemblance between history and epic, there was running through Orderic's mind the familiar lines:

Tuit sunt ocis cist Franceis chevalier,
Ne mais seisante que Deus ad espargniez.²

¹ The Christian victory in *Roland* comes after a prolonged contest in which Marsillies' army is driven from the field; cf. *Roland*, ll. 1910-13.

² *Roland*, ll. 1688, 1689. Earlier in the *Historia*, another line of *Roland*, "Male cançun n'en deit estre cantée" (l. 1466), seems to be paraphrased in Orderic's "Ne turpis cantilena de vobis cantetur in orbe" (*Historia*, XI, c. 26 [edition cited, IV, 255]). See *Modern Language Notes*, XXVIII (November, 1913), 205, n.6.

But the *Roland's* influence on Orderic's Fraga should not be exaggerated at the expense of Larchamp. It may indeed be indebted to *Roland* for its general plan, and for this particular number of sixty. To Larchamp it surely owes the whole third battle, and one or two of the incidents which accompany the other two. For instance, the first battle is said to last three days and three nights. Where did Orderic get this precise notion of the battle's length, unless from William's resistance to the Pagans from early on Monday until Thursday before prime?¹ Alphonso's vow, which provoked the fight, would have suggested Vivien's, and have thus led up to this loan from the epic. Again would not the battlefield of the second encounter, the *campus* of the *Cronica*, be qualified as "Campus Dolens" because of the Larchamp disaster? Certainly Alphonso's dearly bought escape with but ten comrades must have reminded Orderic of William's lonely flight. And in these correspondences between history and legend, so constantly recurring, would there not lie the genesis of the impulse which made Orderic pattern the Christian revenge, the culmination of his tragedy, on the victory won at last by the Christian champion at Larchamp? For with this victory Orderic cuts loose from all ties of fact, to give vent to his great longing to celebrate the triumph of the Cross. With history he also sacrifices topography. He crosses with a bound river and mountain, and, assembling his hostile forces once more on the shore, pictures the utter ruin of the Pagans after the manner of a *Guillaume* or an *Aliscans*—not, however, without a lingering trace of the real Fraga perhaps. Seven hundred is the number of Christian prisoners who leap from the ship to join in the fray. Seven hundred was the number of the king's bodyguard that the *Cronica* tells us fell in one place. Is it history or legend which is guiding Orderic's pen? Or is the coincidence merely accidental?² But the boatload of Christian heads is neither authenticated by history nor furnished, to my knowledge, by legend, although it possesses a genuine epic flavor.

And so Orderic dramatizes an event which in its own actual episodes was already highly dramatic. He has availed himself of the resources of history and legend to construct, according to the desire

¹ *Chanson de Guillaume*, ll. 1119–22.

² We should also cite the passage of *Guillaume* (l. 3023), where Rainouart kills seven hundred Pagans in one boat.

of his own heart, the story of the conflict of Crusader and infidel. That conflict absorbed in his day the engrossing interest of the civilized world, an interest which excuses Orderic for his mingling fiction with fact. Yet had we no other record of Alphonso's campaign than the narrative of Orderic's *Historia*, or were the illuminating pages of the *Cronica* written in France of Philip Augustus rather than in Spain by a contemporaneous chronicler, how could we determine, in Orderic's account, what was fact and what was fiction? Without this veracious guide, how should we know that the oath which occasioned the Campus Dolens disaster was not as legendary as the story of Alphonso's revenge, that the bishop who ordered the flight of the king and who, like Turpin, fell on the field, was not a character of fiction, quite as much as the seven hundred who broke their chains to share in the final triumph? Alphonso escaped with ten companions. Who could have thought this statement at all allied with fact? The figure sixty is found in *Roland* and not in the *Cronica*. Is this negative evidence enough to warrant our assumption that Orderic got that number from *Roland* and not from his source? For the latter gave him the seven hundred, which he reserved for another and poetic use. Was the taunt which provoked Bertran's fatal charge on the camel train an invention? And why should a battle which lasted three days and three nights belong to the realm of romance rather than to the annals of history?

An answer to each or all of these queries brings a lesson home to all lovers of epic poetry. For in the light of these concrete examples, furnished by the two accounts of the Fraga campaign, the vital relation of epic legend to historical fact stands revealed. And we realize that the epic poetry of mediaeval France reflects, by no means unfaithfully, the history of mediaeval France, history not in its general trend alone but, even where we are least suspicious of it, history in its minor details.

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